

## Sunday 26 November 2023 Mary visits Elizabeth - Luke 1 39-45 - Peter Hollander

Introducing the theme

Our theme is joy. Last week Val asked what gave us joy. I said being in the countryside without hearing any traffic noise: just the bird singing and the rustling of the wind in the trees. What brings a smile to the faces of many men and of course some women as well? A car that drives well on empty roads. Sadly my Volvo went to the breakers on Tuesday, but driving the Selvio pass from Switzerland to Italy was fun, as was putting my foot down on an empty Bavarian autobahn. Does this joy equate to the joy mentioned in the Bible? The enjoyment from experiences that are personal – let's say self centred - is not the same as the joy found sharing the happiness found in someone else.

Children (of any age) who achieve something and are joyful, give joy to their parents. When those we love are healed of physical and mental disorders, we share their joy and relief. We've seen how joyful the children are receiving the shoeboxes we send via Blythswood and it raises an emotional response seeing their happiness.

How many examples are there in the Gospels of those healed by Jesus rejoicing at the life changing moment this happens? For example, Luke 17 records the ten lepers being healed, but only one, a Samaritan, came back rejoicing to thank Jesus. Yet the Pharisees always quibbled about the healings of Jesus. They were a miserable bunch of sanctimonious self righteous envious bitter men, jealous of Jesus. There are people who cannot stand anyone better, wiser, richer, kinder, happier than they are themselves. The last of the ten commandments is so often ignored because it's about wishing to have what isn't yours. God doesn't want us to be envious, but rather glad that he blesses others with more than we might have ourselves. He wants us to be content and at peace with others by not coveting anything others have. You cannot be truly joyful over the misfortunes of others any more than being truly joyful by gaining things at the expense of the happiness of others. People who gloat are usually very unhappy underneath a veneer of happiness.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control are worth more than all the material things the world can offer. All these are available as gifts of the Holy Spirit. The greatest is love, but the second is joy. Let us be glad and rejoice that we have received a priceless gift from Jesus... the gift of the Holy Spirit dwelling in us to transform us into better people.

### The talk based on - Luke 1: 39-45

*<sup>39</sup> At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, <sup>40</sup> where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>42</sup> In a loud voice she exclaimed: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! <sup>43</sup> But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? <sup>44</sup> As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup> Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!'*

Last week we looked at joy. Joy is one of those words that crop up a lot in the Bible. As Christians we are told to "be joyful always" (1 Thess 5:16) – one of those short verses with an instruction. So, looking around am I seeing joyful faces? Having mentioned it, some of you have changed your expression – one way or the other!

Some background to the reading we've had. Zechariah, a devout man, was visited by the angel Gabriel and told that his old wife Elizabeth would have a son, John, who would be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth, have the spirit and power of Elijah and he would make ready a people prepared for the Lord. Because Zechariah asked "how can I be sure of this, I am an old man and my wife is well on in years" the angel struck him dumb. Never a good idea to ask an angel, telling you what's going to happen, "are you sure?" God and his angels speak truth... they never lie, so doubting what is said has consequences. Fortunately for Zechariah he was only struck dumb. Nonetheless he did his part and Elizabeth became pregnant. Her reaction was more positive. "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people." We have other examples of women conceiving past childbearing age - Sarah, Abraham's wife who gave birth to Isaac; or women who thought they were barren like Hannah, Elkanah's wife (he had another one Penninah who had children) who gave birth to Samuel. Being childless and being stigmatised as barren was to suffer the disdain, the whispers, the lack of status, the pity and the suspicion of having sinned in some way so that God was inflicting the punishment of childlessness. Male infertility was normally ignored! Elizabeth has had to endure this shame for decades and now she was old, all hope of a child would have been lost long ago. Yet Zechariah kept on praying for a child, because the angel says, "your prayer has been heard". Elizabeth rejoiced and doubtless Zechariah was glad, even if struck dumb, as well because the angel said his son would be a joy and delight.

When we come to this passage. Mary had very recently encountered the angel Gabriel and conceived. Mary didn't doubt the angel telling her that she would have a son, Jesus, but asked *"how will it be since I am a virgin?"* The angel Gabriel is gentler with Mary than Zechariah, and explains that *"the Holy Spirit will come upon her and that her relative Elizabeth who was barren is now in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."*

Mary hurries to visit her relative or kinswoman Elizabeth after this has happened. What kind of relative has been open to some debate, because Mary is of the House of David herself, a descendant of Judah, while Elizabeth would have been a Levite, a descendant of Aaron and Levites usually married Levites, rather than women from the other eleven Israelite tribes. However royal female descendants of David did marry into priestly families. Whatever the relationship, they evidently knew each other enough for Mary to hurry to visit Elizabeth who had been in seclusion for five months. We see from Elizabeth's reaction that she hadn't expected a visit.

*"... she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit."*

In the Old Testament there were times when Holy Spirit fell upon people, nearly all men. We looked at this a few weeks ago. Bezalel was filled with the Holy Spirit to make the things needed for the tent that housed the ark of the covenant. Moses, Gideon, Samson, King Saul, King David, and the prophets all were filled with the Holy Spirit from time to time. John the Baptist was a bit different: he had the Holy Spirit dwelling in him from birth. His mother is now filled with the Holy Spirit as her son leaped in her womb on hearing Mary's voice. We know that Jesus told his disciples shortly before the crucifixion that the Holy Spirit would come, and later at Pentecost the believers were filled with the Holy Spirit. Before then, it was a rarity... celebrating something special God was doing. Today every believer can be filled with the Holy Spirit, if only he or she asks in fulfilment of the prophecy in Joel 2:28-29. *I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.*

What is the consequence of being touched or filled with the Holy Spirit? How do we know this is happening? Usually, it brings a feeling of great joy, great peace, great love, great desire to worship and praise. The praise and worship can be in strange languages and in melodies that are different from what is usual in music. It can also bring tears, a feeling of electric tingling, a filling of light with closed eyes (even when it's dark), a weakness in one's body, a feeling that time has stopped and everything outside is silent or filled with angelic voices praising God. Different experiences for different people because God knows what we need when his Spirit comes upon us. Basking in the presence of God is wonderful, but the Holy Spirit comes to provide us with gifts that will further the kingdom of God on earth. These are needed to build up the church as the bride of Christ, walking in step with his purposes.

We don't know if Mary had already sent word to Elizabeth about Gabriel's visit, but she knew it was remarkable that her baby filled with the Holy Spirit reacted to the voice of Mary, who had probably not seen Elizabeth all those months while she was in seclusion. Elizabeth's reaction is recorded by Luke briefly compared with Mary's song inspired by Holy Spirit.

*<sup>42</sup> In a loud voice she exclaimed: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! <sup>43</sup> But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?'*

What we see from the older woman is acknowledgment that her kinswoman has the greater honour or favour than she received. That shows a humility, gratitude, respect, and understanding of their relative positions – Elizabeth whose son John would show the way and Mary's son Jesus who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Asking why Mary visited her and why it was so special might seem odd to us? A young virgin – Mary was probably under twenty visiting a relative in her fifties or even early sixties. Elizabeth knew Mary was special, but she must also have known that she was favoured by the Lord herself.

As an aside. At Littlebourne we went through the whole of Mark's Gospel and now are going through Acts which was written by Luke. Luke is not an eyewitness of the events in the Gospel. He is an eyewitness, accompanying Paul some of the time, when the narrative changes from the third person to the first-person plural. Luke's Gospel is all in the third person, but he tells us in both his books that he has thoroughly investigated what he puts in his account in an orderly manner from eyewitnesses and servants of the Word. Luke only writes what he knows to be true and there is nothing fanciful or speculative in his accounts. However, there are times when there is a lot of detail and other times when there is little. Often we seek more detail and more background, but Luke usually confines his account to facts and then facts relevant to the narrative. What is important is recorded and what is considered unimportant is left out. What is important is that Elizabeth recognises the Holy Spirit reaction of John in her womb comes from hearing Mary's voice and

she knows Mary was filled with Holy Spirit when she conceived Jesus. What is important is that John and his mother are less important than Jesus and his mother – both are necessary for God's plan to succeed, but as John says when he's grown up, that he is unworthy to untie the sandals of the one more powerful than he is.

*<sup>44</sup> As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.*

Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit knows the answer. John at six months in the womb recognised the voice of another filled with the Holy Spirit and leaped for joy.

Today we have scans and babies do smile and kick and move about hearing their mother's voices, hearing music, hearing singing. Then no one would know if a baby was joyful, but we know he was joyful – kicking and bouncing as babies do.

*<sup>45</sup> Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!*

This is the key verse in this passage. Zechariah doubted, but the Lord's promise was fulfilled. Mary accepted what the Lord told her and believed it would happen... something unheard of in human history and something not repeated in human history. That kind of faith is unusual, especially in a young lady who was engaged to be married to an older man, who might have abandoned her after finding out she was pregnant. Luke doesn't give the explanation that we find in Matthew that an angel visited Joseph to tell him why Mary was pregnant and to take her as his wife. Joseph like Mary accepted what the Lord told him and so Mary never suffered any disgrace as an unmarried mother, and she went on to have other children with Joseph. Elizabeth speaks what God thinks of Mary: *blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would do as he promised.*

We know that there are many promises in the Word of God. Do we believe them? So many challenging passages in the Gospels have an expectation of things being possible that we might think are impossible. Having the angel Gabriel visit us to tell us what will happen is perhaps more direct than reading what Jesus says we can do if we ask in his name. Science of course will deny the impossible is possible... until science discovers the impossible is possible!

I recently saw on Youtube a debate between Christian mathematics professor John Lennox and an atheist chemistry professor Peter Atkins <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5gMS7WTHnho> The atheist would consider meeting an angel to be a hallucination, and no amount of evidence of God, whether miracles or spiritual encounters, would ever convince him of the existence of the Almighty. We know that people refuse to accept what they don't want to accept. Seeing is often not believing if what is seen is believed to be a hallucination. The same applies to hearing the voice of Jesus. Is it our imagination or is it really Jesus? We've gone through the tests if we're unsure... which is wise as it prevents us from doing things in our own strength that God never asked us to do.

Christians who have not received what they asked for from God and who have not seen miracles may well believe that because they haven't got what they wanted, that what they wanted is impossible, rather than being available if God wanted it to happen. Who was counted as righteous because he had the faith to believe what he never received? Abraham. Lack of faith in God is not new, regardless of the evidence of God's existence. People ignored what God did for them within weeks of crossing the Red Sea and seeing the pillar of fire by night and pillar of smoke by day. They constructed a golden calf to worship. They had to wander through the wilderness for forty years because they disbelieved what God told them was available to them. Throughout the history of Israel, people who knew what God could do, ignored him and denied his ability to do the impossible, even after the impossible had been done over and over again!

Isaiah 6: 9-10 *He said, 'Go and tell this people: "Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving." <sup>10</sup> Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.'*

What the Gospels reveal is that Jesus came to earth to reveal that the impossible is possible, and that life has a purpose which is ability and desirability of mankind to have a relationship with our Creator, God. Elizabeth and Mary are two women who accepted that God could do the impossible – Elizabeth probably past the menopause is having a baby and Mary a virgin is having a baby. Both babies had God ordained ministries planned for them and both babies grew into men who obeyed what God told them to do. Elizabeth childless for so long had the joy of being a mother and being filled by the Holy Spirit – a living communion with God. Mary had the joy of being a mother, the comfort of a loving husband, and being filled with the Holy Spirit – a living communion with God. For us today, regardless of whether we are told something by an angel, or Holy Spirit, we can have living communion with God by asking Holy Spirit to dwell in us so that we understand not only why we are here – meeting together to worship God, to praise God and to have

fellowship with one another – but that we have an eternal destination which is everlasting life with our Creator God. Whatever our doubts, whatever our fears, whatever our disappointments, we can overcome them by praising God, fixing our eyes on Jesus, and having the certainty that God loves us, Jesus can forgive us, and Holy Spirit can comfort us.

Behind the story of Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, Mary and her husband Joseph, is that in Israel, under Roman occupation, there were men and women with the same faith in God as was found in Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, Elkanah and Hannah, Ruth and Boaz all of whom lived in places where their faith was under pressure because of circumstances. Without the generations of faithful believers in God, Elizabeth and Mary would have probably not been chosen for the important roles they had been selected for. John the Baptist's ministry was in part widely known because of his birth, his upbringing as a child, and his message of repentance. But because God was behind his entrance into the world, his message reached many and softened the hearts of many to receive what Jesus would teach them. Elizabeth gets a few lines in the Bible because of her faithfulness and her recognition of God's faithfulness towards her... giving her a longed-for son in her old age. Her joy was increased by what Mary received... she wasn't envious, or jealous that Mary had something better, but was joyful. When others are more blessed than we are, do we rejoice and praise God? Are we glad when we see others younger than ourselves grow in the things of God faster than we did, and are we glad that they walk ahead of us instead of behind? Elizabeth was glad to see Mary was given more favour than herself and for that she will always be an example to us all. *Philippians 2: 1-3 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, <sup>2</sup> then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, <sup>4</sup> not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.* This is Elizabeth's reaction to Mary's visit. Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then went home.